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ABSTRACT

This working paper describes the development of a child care center in Berlin, Germany, focusing on how the program's pedagogical principles support children's learning, how respect for diversity is integrated in everyday practice, and how program quality and accessibility are defined within a multicultural context. Chapter 1 describes the construction of the child care center from an abandoned parking garage and the response of the community to the renovation. Chapter 2 details efforts to incorporate an intercultural and bilingual approach to meet the child care needs of the primarily-Turkish neighborhood. Chapter 3 presents the pedagogical framework, the contextual child development approach, based upon the premise the children possess individual rights, that they accomplish the steps necessary for their development through their own activities, and that the adult's role is to support children through accountable relationships and to provide a stimulating environment. Chapter 4 describes the planning and furnishing of rooms. Chapter 5 focuses on multicultural education and the center's use of an anti-bias curriculum. Chapter 6 provides examples of some of the curricular themes and describes the use of personal puppets or persona dolls. Chapter 7 describes how program staff work with parents. Chapter 8 highlights new projects, including the development of quality criteria for the contextual approach and the creation of a relaxation room. Appended are guidelines for implementing the contextual child development approach in child care centers. (KB)

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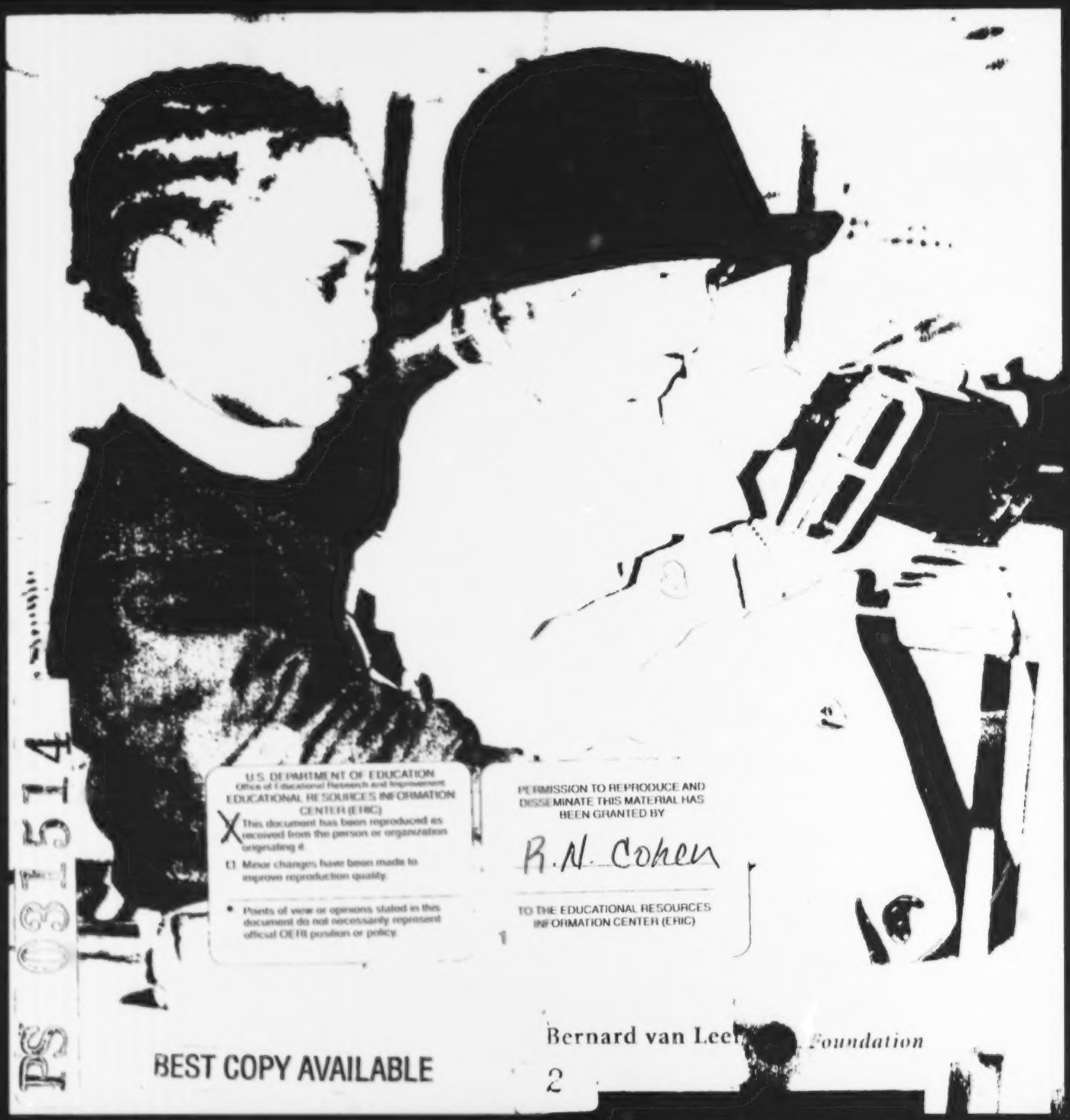
WORKING PAPERS IN

Early Childhood Development

# *From Car Park to Children's Park:*

## *A Childcare Centre in Development*

by Gerda Wunschel



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## About the paper

This Working Paper describes the development process of a childcare centre. The Dresdener Strasse childcare centre was established 14 years ago in a former parking garage in a colourful Berlin neighbourhood. From the start, the early childhood professionals who created the centre have made full use of whatever resources were available, both in terms of the physical setting, and of the human resources - the childcare professionals and the neighbouring community. As the centre grew, the educational principles were developed and adjusted according to the needs. In doing so, the educators have created a unique institution that is rooted in the community, and that attempts to create bridges for children between the institutional world of childcare and the home setting.

The description of how the centre became what it is now, is of interest to anyone concerned with issues of diversity and multiculturalism, as well as to anyone interested in examples of how to open the doors of a childcare institution to parents and the surrounding community.

The centre's pedagogical approach is developed as they go along, using the framework of the Situationsansatz, the Contextual Child Development Approach. New ideas are incorporated and capacity is built where it is felt to be needed. At the same time, the educators are contributing important practical experiences to the further development of the Situationsansatz and to the thinking of other professionals in the field. These experiences, along with the approach that underlies these methods, makes this description of the childcare centre well worth sharing with a wider readership.

## About the author

Gerda Wunschel grew up in Bavaria, Germany and moved to Berlin in1974 where she trained as an educator. She worked with infants until 1983, when she became a deputy daycare manager and worked with schoolchildren in after school care. In 1988 the Dresdener Strasse Kita (childcare centre) was established and she started there as a daycare manager. Since 1999 the Dresdener Strasse centre has been participating in the National Quality Initiative, quality development for the Situationsansatz. Gerda Wunschel is a member of the Institut für den Situationsansatz.

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WORKING PAPERS IN

Early Childhood Development

# *From Car Park to Children's Park:*

## *A Childcare Centre in Development*

by Gerda Wunschel

July 2003

Bernard van Leer Foundation

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# Foreword

All young children are entitled to have access to quality childcare services. Their parents should have the choice to entrust their young ones to capable adults and a stimulating environment. The childcare centre (Kita) located at the Dresdener Strasse, in the heart of Kreuzberg, Berlin is such a place, and children and adults enjoy being there. In big urbar areas all over Europe, many young children from various ethnic origins, from diverse cultural backgrounds, from different family styles, with diverse economic strengths grow up not only in the family, but spend a major part of the day out of the home in the childcare centre.

It is, therefore, imperative that major questions such as 'what is quality' and 'who defines quality' are discussed and negotiated among the various stakeholders: children, parents, childcare workers, childcare managers and policy makers alike. It is equally important to question the so-called developmentally appropriate practice: does this suit children's development effectively when seeking respect for diversity? The *Situationsansatz* pedagogy used in the Kita Dresdener Strasse is strongly anchored in the children's environment and supports optimal learning. These pedagogical principles and the democratic character of the centre help children in building a confident self and a group identity. It supports them in interacting with children and adults from diverse backgrounds, in critical thinking about prejudices and in enabling them to stand up for themselves and for others in the face of unfairness.

This working paper gives the reader insights in how a childcare centre is owned by its users, how the pedagogical principles support children's learning, how the concept of respect for diversity is integrated in everyday practice and how quality and accessibility are defined.

Rita Swinnen
Programme Specialist
Bernard van Leer Foundation

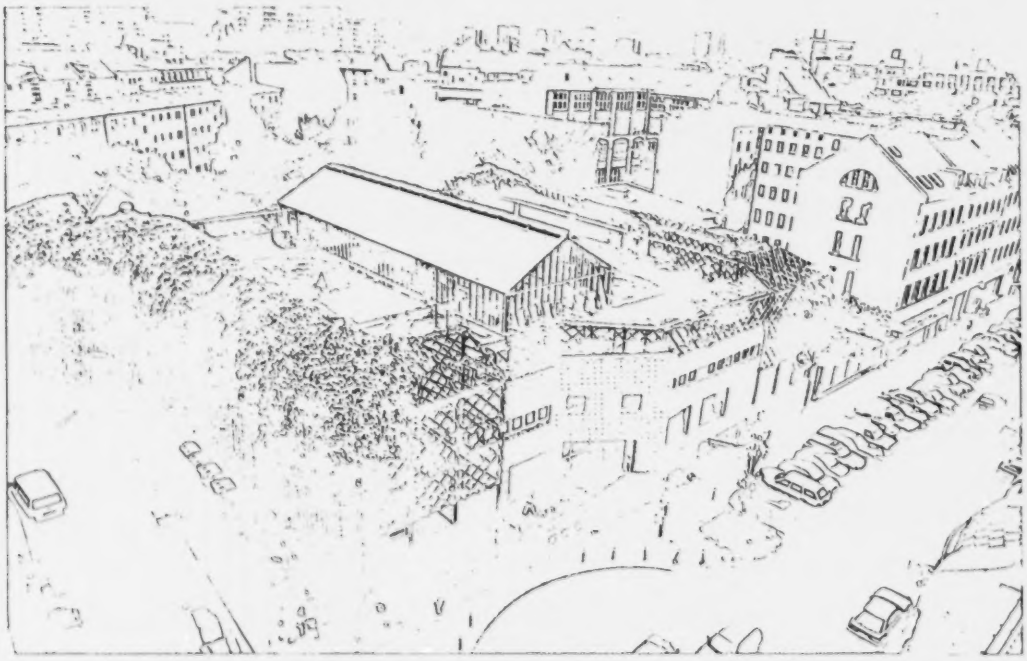
## Chapter one

# *From car park to 'children's park'*

Thank heavens for errors! A multi-storey car park, practically unused by the neighbourhood residents, was to be pulled down. This political decision from the 1970s was thankfully never carried out. Other ideas developed in the course of preparations for an architectural exhibition in West Berlin: it was decided that this car park should be turned into a 'children's park' - a childcare centre for children.

At that time it had become absolutely necessary to generate new places for children in municipal childcare centres. Berlin was still a divided city administered by two different political systems. The western part of the city was chronically short of 27,000 places, and in the district of Kreuzberg, where the car park was located, 4,000 children a year were waiting for a place in a childcare centre.

Kreuzberg is a working class district in the centre of the city: a 'colourful' district with a high percentage of immigrants. Every third inhabitant is born with a nationality other than the German nationality. It is a district where one third of the residents have either completed their university degrees or are still studying, and one third have either limited or incomplete school education; a district where unemployment is substantially higher than in other districts of



Aerial photo of the building. *Photo: Kita Dresdener Strasse*

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the city, particularly among young people; where the *Autonomen*, a political subculture that had its origins in the 1980s, would try to impose their visions by means of words and stones - including against unpopular construction projects such as the conversion of a car park into a childcare centre; a district with beautiful old houses, tree-lined streets and canals next to desolate concrete high-rise structures and neglected, run-down buildings. All this - and much more - is what Kreuzberg is made of.

'Coming soon to this neighbourhood: a prison for children!' was instantly spray-painted onto the construction site fence as soon as construction began. With its location near the 'Kottbusser Tor', the poorest area of Kreuzberg, in the shadow of high-rise buildings, people were afraid that the conversion of a car park into a childcare centre would lead to nothing but restrictions for the children. Admittedly, the outdoor area - that is, our garden - is rather small. However, the four - out of the original seven - parking levels which were integrated in this renovation offer an abundance of space. In order to compensate for the densely populated surroundings, the building was to be reconstructed according to ecological principles, with plants climbing up the outer walls. The roof was to be turned into a roof garden where the children would have their own flower beds.

As soon as the renovation got under way, we, a group of early childhood professionals became involved with the building project. Three early childhood educators who had been working for other childcare centres in the district, and three advisors formed the planning group. As time went on, other educators were to join us, and together we would later form the new centre's childcare team.

The parking decks that were adjacently offset against each other in mid-storey were planned to create a bright and transparent interior, without inner walls. Inner walls would only obstruct a view into the rooms. Such an open building called for an equally open pedagogical framework. So we decided to adopt an open working relationship in all that we do. During the renovation we cooperated with the architect and together we managed to come to agreements on how to proceed. For example, following our suggestions he had mirrors put up on the walls for the children. An additional small sleeping room for the youngest children was installed as well. Our involvement also became crucial for the creation of the furnishings and the bathrooms – all gains that helped to ensure that the design of the building matched its new purpose. We still find the architectural vision of this building, as an unobtrusive shell that would take on colour in the presence of the children and their creations, highly appropriate.

Public relations were a further challenge to the planning group from the very outset.
The reconstruction, and its then trendsetting approach, were described in pedagogical and architectural magazines as well as in local neighbourhood newspapers. We considered it very important to show our neighbours what

was to become of the unpopular car park and, at the same time, to have become established in this neighbourhood before the official opening. On 1 February 1988 we were ready for the opening: the 136 children who had been accepted came with their families to the childcare centre. The following weekend we invited the neighbours to come and see what had become of the car park. During their lunch breaks the educators would hang up invitations in the hallways of the neighbouring houses and put letters into the mailboxes. A lot of neighbours, not only the children's parents, turned up. They told us what they knew about the house and were interested in learning more about the development of the building. They made a lot of suggestions and were eager to hear more about our work.
Up to the present day we have always welcomed visitors. Hospitality is a part of our job that all of us share, from director to cook, and that we enjoy doing. We present the work we do to our visitors, and in their feedback they reflect their impressions back to us. Our guests frequently give us new ideas and stimulate us to reassess critical issues. Moreover, we learn about our visitors' work, we exchange views and see this as an enrichment of our work.

The effort to become established in this district, which began during the planning phase, has continued since the opening of the childcare centre. Even today we are working in teams of overlapping expertise and support, critically examining the situation of children and adolescents in our neighbourhood. But we have also tried to involve the local community, by inviting our neighbours from the senior citizens' home and initiating joint activities, for example. Unfortunately, this has not been successful so far, but we have not yet given up.

We participate in the neighbourhood street parties, either directly by suggesting games and offering food, or indirectly by granting musicians or theatre groups access to our rooms for the rehearsal of their performances. These take place in our 200 square metre hall where neighbourhood meetings are also occasionally held. For example, local tradesmen, mainly immigrants, come together regularly in our hall to compare problems or discuss activities.

## Chapter two

# *The language of childcare*

The closer the centre's official opening day came, the more we developed the specifics of our pedagogical plan. We became increasingly aware that 60 percent of our immediate neighbours were not German speaking, but were chiefly of Turkish origin, and that many children who would be attending the childcare centre had either no or very poor German language skills. We therefore expanded our pedagogical basis with an intercultural approach to early childhood education.

Recruiting Turkish speaking educators seemed a difficult task in the beginning. In 1986, qualified childcare workers were hard to find. The few who were available were either employed in the so-called *Kinderläden*, independent parent run childcare centres, or in privately funded childcare institutions, but not in public childcare centres which were suffering from a negative image at the time. From the migrant educators' point of view this was understandable, since they were often not allowed to address the children in their home language, because as educators they were expected to teach the children German.

In order to find Turkish speaking colleagues we contacted educators who worked with intercultural approaches in privately funded organisations. They were very helpful with the placement of educators. We did not necessarily require our Turkish speaking colleagues to have professional educational training, but we did expect them to have worked with children for an extended period of time. The team gave them full support, so that they could take up in-service training to complete their degree in childcare.

The search for educators of Turkish origin had another significant benefit: we gained support and help from colleagues of other childcare centres for the development of our intercultural approach and thereby established work relationships that have lasted up to the present day. Now we also exchange views on specific work related policy issues.

Today, 14 years later, it is easier to recruit children's educators of non-German origin. However, it cannot be guaranteed that the educators speak their own parents' language at a sufficiently proficient level. A good command of the mother tongue is, however, a precondition for our approach to language. We follow a strategy that offers the children an abundance of opportunities to learn their home language and to acquire an equally rich vocabulary in German. To quote just one example: recently, a five year old Turkish speaking boy, the son of parents with poor German language skills, stood next to a little girl from his group who was trying out various poses. Watching her, he then said: 'I guess you look like a real statue'. We were proud of how he applied such an

expression and informed his parents about it. They were also delighted by their son's language ability, even more so as they themselves were not familiar with the word 'statue'.

This example clearly shows that we are on the right path when promoting both the acquisition of the mother tongue and the second language. The limited language skills of migrant children is a topic that is currently being hotly and very emotionally debated in Berlin. Without sufficient knowledge of German, it is hardly possible for migrant children to achieve school certificates and professional training. Finding the right approach and determining the fastest possible method by which the children can learn the German language are two highly controversial issues. Politicians are calling for language training in childcare centres in order to speed up the children's acquisition of German. But how can this idea be realised by an educator who is faced with a group of Turkish speaking children who are new to the centre and who cannot even understand their own childcare worker; children who do not have the faintest idea of what is required of them?

At the time of the official opening the children attending the childcare centre were exclusively of Turkish and German origin. Our community has since become much more multicultural and diverse. Although we still speak the two dominant languages, German and Turkish, in the groups, we respect any other home language and try to integrate it to some extent into our daily routine. Here we call on the parents as experts, and learn from them how to greet in their language and how to say good-bye, how to say the names of the days of the week and how to count. Thus we can support the children, if they wish to count in their mother tongue in our daily morning circles together.

Two Turkish speaking educators have recently begun a regular discussion group for parents of Turkish origin in the childcare centre. They debate issues related to childrearing in general and raising children in a foreign country in particular. Ten to 15 mothers and even a father regularly attend these discussions. It is of great advantage to the parents that they can speak in their own language. The childcare workers report that each participant has something to say, even those who tend to remain silent at general parents' evenings. As a team we are very proud of our colleagues, who have succeeded both in involving all the educators in the preparations, and in gradually including all of the centre's Turkish speaking educators in these discussion groups.

However, there are some constraints to our ability to hire the educators of our choice. Since the German reunification (the *Wende*), the birth rate in former East Berlin has dropped, by about half. As there had been full service coverage for all children in kindergartens and crèches before reunification, after the *Wende* some childcare centres had to close down. The childcare workers who were made redundant, however, had job guarantees and therefore had to be employed in childcare centres in other

neighbourhoods and in the western part of Berlin. These educators are all of German origin. This explains why the employment of childcare workers whose home language is not German has become extremely difficult, and is only possible with a special permit.

Our experiences support us in our conviction that transferring a comprehensive knowledge of the mother tongue is the right approach. Only under these conditions will the children be able to learn the second language. This includes promoting a 'culture of communication' as an essential part of the work in childcare centres. We need to address the children individually, to explain and to read aloud to them as much as possible. We need to listen to them attentively while they are talking, and it is our task to respond seriously and comprehensively. If these conditions are met, then the children will have the best preparation for school. Longitudinal studies do not exist, but daily newspapers annually publish the names of secondary school graduates. Among them we frequently come across the names of children who attended our kindergarten as infants.

Turkish parents' discussion group. *Photo: Kita Dresdener Strasse*



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## Chapter three

# *Our pedagogical framework*

The pedagogical approach that was developed during the planning phase has been maintained over all these years. However, we are continuously striving to avoid any standstill, to take on new challenges, insights and needs and to adjust them to our work. We have come increasingly close to the basic principles of the Contextual Child Development Approach, and we have planned our pedagogical work accordingly.

### *The Contextual Child Development Approach*

The Dresdener Strasse centre has developed a pedagogical framework using principles that originate from the Situationsansatz, the Contextual Child Development Approach. A basic premise is that children accomplish the steps necessary for their development through their own activities. Adults are responsible for giving children the support they need and for providing a stimulating environment in which children can develop.

The pedagogical goals contain important aspects of personal development in terms of competence, personal development, social behaviour, and knowledge. In respecting the different experiences the children bring with them, the practitioners encourage the children to participate in shaping the social process that they are part of.

The Contextual Approach includes a range of principles which give rise to practices such as:

- providing stimulating learning opportunities and introducing new areas of learning to sustain children's curiosity and interest, their desire to discover new things and their joy in experimentation;
- using attentive observation of play to learn how children interpret the world and about what stimulates children;
- actively involving children in everything that affects them, as far as it is appropriate to their development;
- recognising and using the unique learning opportunities offered by children of diverse cultural heritages living together, and supporting intercultural interaction;
- arranging the rooms and their furnishings to stimulate experimentation, discovery and creativity in the children;
- inviting parents and other adults to actively participate in everything that happens in the childcare centres;
- developing close relations with the social environment and being a hub of neighbourly contact and interaction;
- having an open planning process, that is developed together with children, parents and other adults, and that is flexible;
- viewing the childcare centre as a learning organisation, and creating room and time for reflection and change with regard to the institutional and organisational practices.


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We shall discuss our work on the Contextual Approach again towards the end of this paper.

One of the fundaments of our approach is that we adopt an 'open working relationship', which means that we have given up working in small groups in favour of working in larger teams. The children grow up together in same age units. They will be accompanied by the same educators from their first day in the centre until they reach school age. Only on their first day at school will they meet new educators. The larger number of children and a variety of educators within one unit offer the possibility of differentiated learning in smaller groups.

Our practice of 'open working' has remained basically the same. Having started with five units with a total of 136 children, we now have 150 children in six units. Three educators are in charge of each group of children at crèche and elementary level (between 1 and 6 years old). In the *Hort*, the after school care centre where children with special needs are integrated, there are four educators. The children in each unit are about the same age. The group of 6 to 12 year olds consists entirely of schoolchildren – there are very few all-day schools in Germany.

Group sizes vary by age. Generally it is true to say that the younger the children, the smaller the groups. Three educators are in charge of 14 children aged between 1 and 2. From 3 to 6 years old, there are 25 children in each group. Unfortunately, politicians have made drastic cuts in childcare funding. Therefore places for the entire day are not available to all children in Berlin: the children of unemployed parents may attend the childcare centre for only five or seven hours a day. This explains why the various groups can be of different sizes or that fewer educators look after them, according to the childcare time permitted for each child. And what is more, it has recently been decided that a childcare worker in the *Hort*, who had previously been responsible for 16 children, will now have 22 children to take care of.

Over time we have faced an increasing number of requests by parents for a place for their children in our centre, and we are now caring for 150 children. This is only possible because the childcare centre has an area of 2,400 square metres. But we cannot accept all children: in the summer of 2002, only 27 places could be made available for a total of 130 applicants. Fortunately the rooms within our childcare centre are very large and also numerous, allowing us to discuss the above mentioned alterations in our teams and apply the most appropriate solution without spatial restrictions.

However, we sometimes tread unusual paths and give up space that was originally reserved for the childcare staff. When we decided to look after babies in group rooms that had previously been used exclusively by older children, we discovered that this would be too noisy for the babies when taking their naps. We discussed various possibilities until a colleague finally suggested relinquishing the staff room on that floor. Thereupon the team fell silent; finally the

smokers stated that this room was absolutely necessary to them. Others again spoke in favour of having two instead of three staff rooms, considering this an opportunity for improving communication between the groups. Everyone thought this over and we all agreed on this suggestion. Nowadays this room is no longer a babies' sleeping room, nor is it the former staff room again – this year we have turned it into a *Snoezelen* room, a place where one can experience all of the senses in a darkened and calming atmosphere.

*Photo: VBJK*

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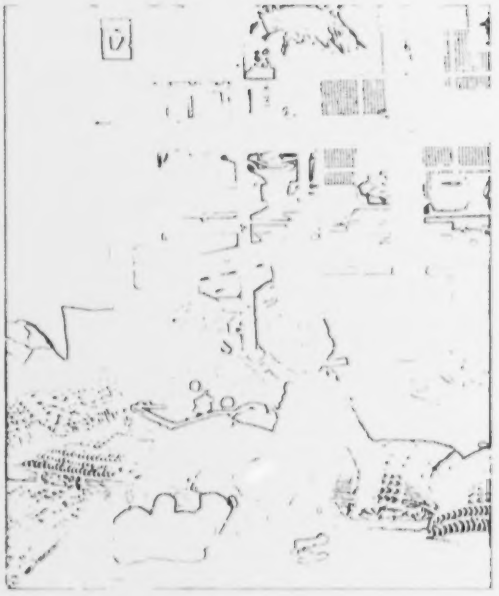
## Chapter four

# *Planning and furnishing the rooms*

Turning now to the design and arrangement of the rooms – an aspect that has always been of high priority to us: from the outset it has been part of our approach that the children and their educators would not spend their five years together in the same group rooms.

Every year, in February, the team plans the admission of the new children. We discuss how many newcomers will join which group. By then, we have already heard from the parents which school their child will be attending, and whether he or she will be needing after school care. This basic information helps us in assigning the groups to the rooms after the summer holidays. It is one of our principles that each unit is provided with several rooms and that basically none of the rooms serves a specific function, like for example, being reserved for kindergarten children or babies. Nevertheless, the team is quite aware that larger groups require more space.

This is then followed by a process that is always captivating, although it does not always run smoothly. First of all, the educators discuss which items they will take with them from the old to the new group rooms. Although the children are excited about moving into new rooms as they grow older, at the same time it is very important that they recognise familiar items in the new rooms. It is discussed with the children which things should be left behind or



The centre has a bright and transparent interior.
*Photo: BvLF*

taken along. Some items stay with the children from the baby group until they enter school: for example, a doll's cradle in which the child lay in once in a while as a baby, which is now used to rock a doll.

As suggested above, some problems do arise when planning the move. Even in a cooperative, mutually supportive team, it is only human that everybody will want to keep the best items in the group and would also like to get hold of the most appreciated things, so that the least wanted ones are left behind. The management sees to it that everything remains in balance in

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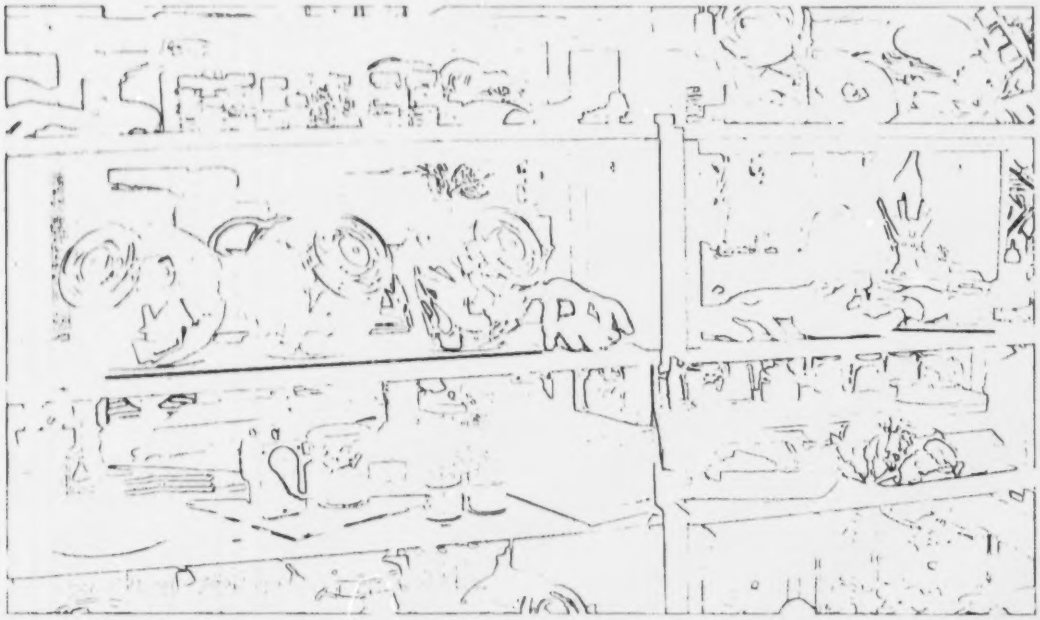
the centre by repeatedly pointing out what opportunities there are, and reminding everyone to consider what is best for the children in their present development phase and to bear in mind what the resulting appropriate arrangement of the rooms will be. We have also agreed to keep some basic furnishings in each room, with book shelves and furniture, which are not to be removed. Admittedly it is sometimes a tiresome business to discuss the same issues again and again. At present, though, we hardly get any funding from the city of Berlin for new furniture or play materials. Therefore it is important for the team to provide items of equal quality. All the same, we are still proud to observe with how much commitment and imagination the educators and the children, sometimes with the parents' support, have managed this process.

But as a matter of fact, at that point our work has not even really started yet. Ideally, after the summer holidays, the educators undertake the following task: the attentive observation of each individual child and of the group to find out the specific interests within the group and the children's stages of development. From the results of this observation process, the educators will conclude which opportunities to make available to the children in the new rooms in the coming year and decide on how these rooms will finally be equipped.

And so the process of moving and redecorating the rooms begins. It is similar to any ordinary house-moving: packing, moving, rearranging furniture, and unpacking. Sometimes the rooms need renovating. The city council has also cut its expenditure for renovation work. Therefore



Shelves in the art studio. *Photo: VBJK*

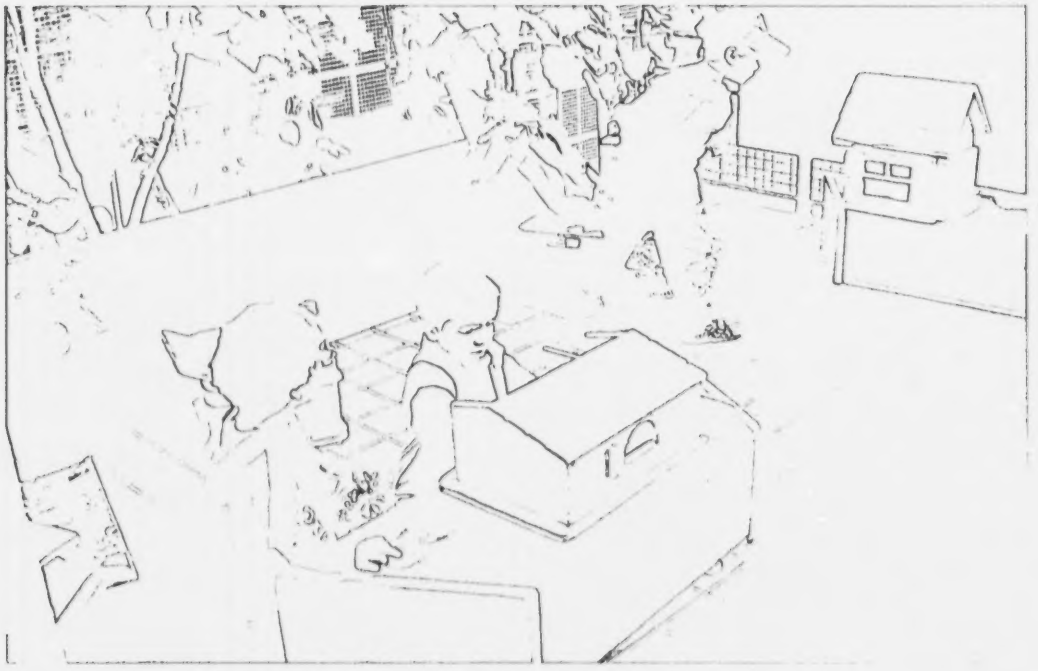


*Photo: VBJK*

we have taken to doing it ourselves, with our caretaker in charge. In this context it is important to create space for the children, encouraging them to find their own way, keep themselves busy and discover new materials that foster their creative powers.

Usually we also redecorate in the summer holidays, when fewer children attend the childcare centre. The children who stay with us during the summer are involved in the process of moving. Together we furnish and decorate the new rooms. The children are also thrilled to be a year older and to have access to the new rooms that they had already visited before the holidays.

Still, Ilona, a childcare worker, reported about a boy who had been on holiday in Turkey with his family for a fairly long time. This boy felt utterly insecure when he approached the new rooms for the first time. He remained on the threshold and did not want to enter. His childcare worker guided him to his locker which was familiar to him and where he would keep his personal things. After that, she showed him the 'animal corner', a construction area with animal figures that he already knew from his former group rooms. When he recognised the familiar animals, he was content to stay in the group.

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## Chapter five

# *Multicultural education*

When furnishing our rooms we also focus on the origin of our children's families. How can we identify the family background of the children? In each group we have created family picture walls. When the families join our childcare centre, they bring photos with them of all those family members who are close to the child, pets included. These family pictures are put up next to the sleeping places of the younger children. This makes it easier for them to take a nap. A little girl was observed once, stroking each family member before she finally fell asleep.

In the hallways a photo gallery is emerging, showing photos of all the children who have been with us so far. As time goes on, photos of the children still to join us will be added. We like all children to make their mark and leave behind a record.

Designing and rearranging the rooms means building bridges for each child: bridges that gently but steadily guide the children from their homes into the childcare centre. Everyday items that are familiar in their culture and well-known to the children are integrated into the rooms. This includes areas for role-playing and dolls. The kitchen of one group is equipped with a Turkish *semaver*, a tea urn, and an Italian *caffettiera*, coffee maker. Thus the children recognise what they know from home and the relationship they have with it. Cushions and carpets, which are popular with many Turkish

Family pictures next to the places where the younger children sleep. *Photo: VBJK*

Role-playing corner. *Photo: Kita Dresdener Strasse*

speaking families, are very suitable for making quiet corners. Certainly not everything is authentic, but this also applies to a lot of what we call 'German'. This variety can also be observed in our team with educators coming from various regions and being of different origins. We simply consider it absolutely necessary not to convey stereotypes, but to clearly express and accept cultural differences.

Educators of Turkish origin take on a great many functions, not only with respect to the interior design. Besides all other tasks, they also represent their culture and introduce it into our daily routine on an equal footing with German culture. These are high expectations which are sometimes difficult to meet. But it is here that those tiny little things and gestures become important. For example, the children observed that Özlem would cut the German pumpernickel (dark rye bread) with a knife, but tore the Turkish flat bread into pieces. This became subject of discussions with the children: discussions that are important and naturally reveal differences.

In recent years in particular we have only been able to employ childcare workers who grew up in Germany and see their country of origin as the home of their relatives and as a holiday destination. However, we believe that these colleagues still have something important to give to our children. They know what it means to live between two worlds, knowing one world better than the other, and thus they can help the children to develop their own identity.

One morning, on a visit to the five year olds, Nats and Pemela, two girls with parents who come from African countries, told us that they were the only children in the childcare centre with their skin colour. They made a clear distinction between themselves and the children from African-German relationships and added that no childcare worker looked like them. This observation was true and we asked them what we should do. They did not know what to suggest. Some weeks later we visited an Educators'

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Training College where we became acquainted with a student of African origin. We spoke with her, and she gladly agreed to do her traineeship with us. Nats and Pemela became closely attached to this trainee. It was of no importance to them that she came from a different country than their parents. They were interested, above all, in what she could tell them about her life in Nigeria.

In the spring of 2002 an international group visited us, including a black woman. We observed that Perry, a two year old black boy, immediately approached this woman to get in touch with her – the only person he shared the same skin colour with. None of the other people interested him.

As our groups are becoming increasingly multicultural we also have to face critical debates. One project, in which parents presented the area where they were born or where they have relatives, was critically evaluated by parents of African-European children. They pointed out the heavy discrimination that their children experience in German society, and the fact that their children are Germans because they are growing up as Germans. This was followed by stimulating discussions also with the other parents, for instance on what it means for children to have roots in two continents.

The increasingly multicultural composition of the groups has led us to become involved with the anti-bias approach developed by Louise Derman-Sparks.[1] In May 2002 we initiated a workshop on this subject and were deeply moved by our varying experiences with the issue of discrimination. This workshop made us very sensitive both to the experiences of the others in the team as well as to what children and parents face in our society. Now we are eager to encourage the children to take a stand against discrimination. How can we contribute to this? We still have a lot of questions and even more doubts about whether we are doing everything correctly and whether the process will work out well. But we are certain that we have chosen the right track. Moreover, one of the basic principles of the Contextual Approach is very important here: that educators are both teachers and learners.

This in particular makes it ever more exciting for us to speak with people from other countries about their work experiences and to participate in exchange programmes. For example, with Belgian colleagues who are also grappling with the anti-bias approach, and recently visited us.

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1 This approach is known as the Anti-bias Curriculum. 'Anti-bias' refers to the fact that everyone has prejudices, and that all children internalise the prevailing societal prejudices from a very early age. It is further argued that there is no such thing as an 'unprejudiced' educator; rather, all educators (and all adults) must actively combat their own prejudices as well as those in the care and educational institutions in which they work. Source: Vandenbroeck, p. 123 (2001). See also Derman-Sparks, p. 3 (1989).

*A day in the life of the childcare centre*

What does a day in our childcare centre look like? We open at 7.30 a.m. There is one educator present, to welcome the few children who arrive at this time. If parents need to start work at an earlier time, they will inform us beforehand, in which case a childcare worker will come in earlier. This happens occasionally, and we like to meet the parents' needs. The real childcare centre routine starts at 8 a.m. when most of our educators have arrived and the majority of the children have been brought by their parents. Together we prepare breakfast, which is eaten in separate groups.

At 9.30 a.m., when everybody has arrived, we begin with the morning circle. The children and the educators exchange greetings in the group and together we settle which day it is today and what it is called in each child's language. One child is asked to count the children and adults. In the morning circle we talk to each other; it also offers an opportunity either to learn new songs or to sing familiar ones with the whole group. We discuss the various activities that will take place in the morning. As a rule, the educators make three to four suggestions. The children may choose an activity, and will spend the rest of the morning in a small group of children with one educator.

The morning circle ritual is important to us for two reasons: firstly, the children are being well prepared for school. They sit in the large group and have the chance of conversing in this group. This means they need to listen and to wait until it is their turn to speak. They also learn how to express themselves in front of a group. All children are motivated to say something. Secondly, the morning circle also helps the children to structure their day, like the fixed times for lunch and the fruit snack in the afternoon.

The small groups can be formed according to the individual needs of the children and it is quite possible that one childcare worker may be busy with only two children. The large group does not come together again before lunch time. After lunch each group turns to calmer activities, even those children who do not take naps anymore. Again, the children decide on an activity and carry it out. By 3 p.m. the younger children have finished their naps and are picked up by their parents. The childcare centre closes at 5.30 p.m.

Morning circle with two year olds. *Photo: Kita Dresdener Strasse*



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## Chapter six

# *Working with themes*

If several educators form a team together, it is necessary that they schedule their work. This is done in various ways. Firstly, observing the children attentively, for example what they like playing, what affects them and what they want to learn, takes up quite some time. Furthermore, from the time that the childcare workers have already spent in the group, they know what the children are capable of. These findings enable the educators to select specific topics that will be worked on with the children. The actual preparations for the work in the small morning groups take place every two weeks. In order to work on this, educators from the neighbouring group will come in to mind the group. In the following week, the children of the second group will in turn be taken care of by the first group's educators.

Most of the educators get ideas for themes while observing the children, and projects may develop which are then carried out with the children. Often new topics develop out of previous projects.

Ilse tells us about one such an example from her group:

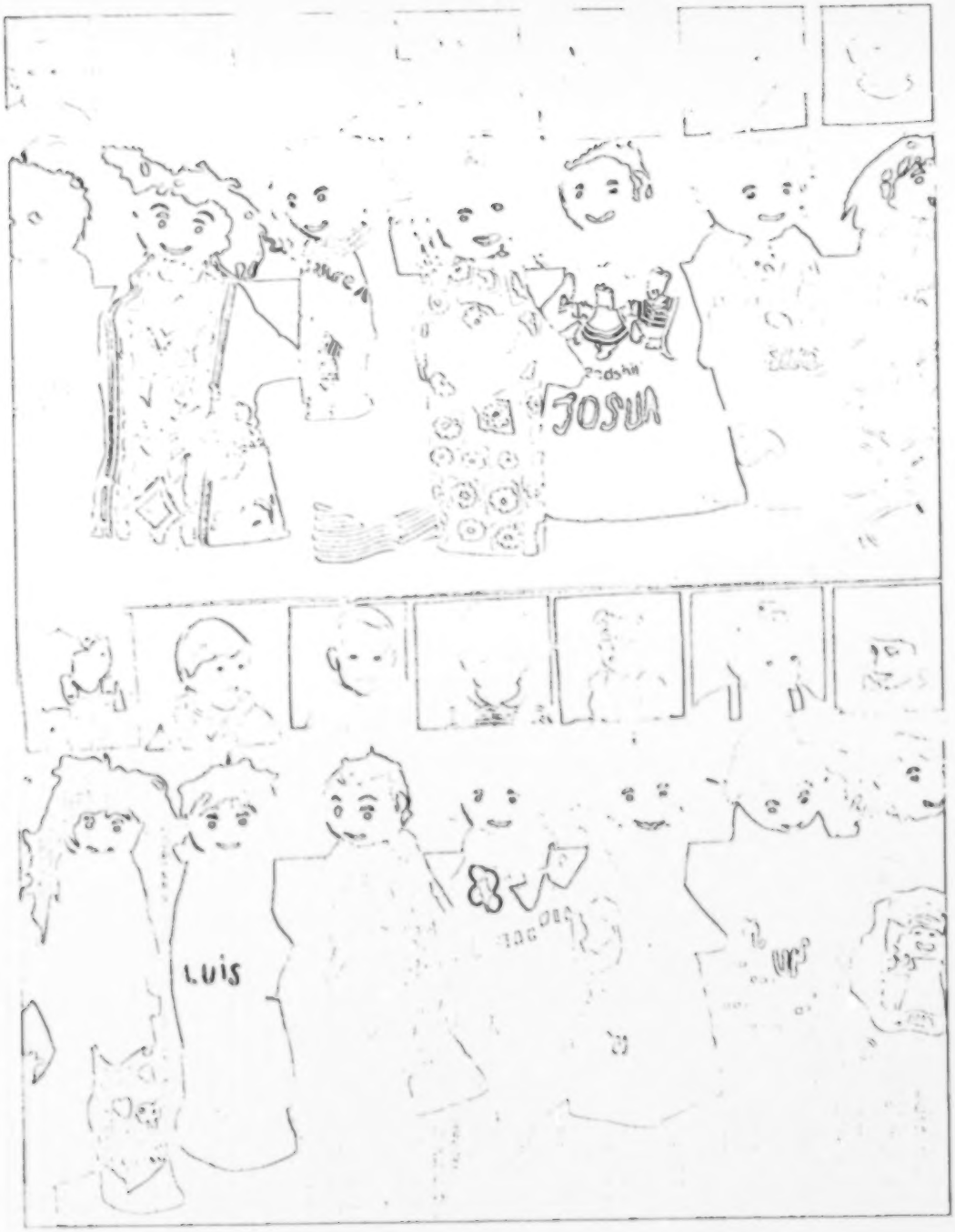
The first phase of the project dealt with the topic of 'getting a sibling', because a few siblings had been born in our unit. After a couple of months the theme changed to 'big children - little children, what they can do and what they can't do'. For each of our children we made a personal hand puppet that looked like him or her.

Our children are now between two and a half and three and a half years old and they dearly love the little look-alikes that bear their names. For some children these have replaced the stuffed animals they slept with at nap time. These puppets or persona dolls serve several, partly differing, functions for us and for the children:

- At this age, children can communicate personal conflicts quite expressively through their puppet, and thus give valuable hints to the educators that can contribute to resolving the issue.

  To give an example: Emma, a three and a half year old girl, was having problems getting to sleep. When asked about her puppet, 'How did Little Emma sleep?' she answered 'Not very well, there were wolves. Little Emma was scared and became fidgety. The parents must help Little Emma so that she won't fidget so much.'

- Through the puppet the children are able to perceive situations from different perspectives, also from a parent's perspective. Paul, another three and a half year old, said 'Little Paul was naughty again! I had to scold him.'




Personal puppets and photos of the children they belong to. *Photo: Kita Dresdener Strasse*



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The children enjoy being big in comparison with their puppets. The childcare worker can let the puppet do things that the children perhaps would otherwise not have the courage to do. In the morning circle some children will sing together with their puppet, but will not sing alone.

- The educator can put a child at the centre of attention by pretending that the puppet is the child. The children find it very entertaining to watch themselves perform in little plays. Sometimes this leads to discussions. A problematic situation between the children can be imitated by using the puppets. Different solutions are then suggested and discussed.
- Children use the puppets themselves and perform small plays. There is always an audience and the spectators are very much involved in the plays. Sometimes a child watching will fetch his or her puppet and participate in the play from the viewer's position. The younger children are satisfied to just let their puppets appear on stage.

We have realised that the children love their personal puppets dearly. They are taken to bed, to meals, to playing times and also on weekend trips. The puppets accompany the children in our group until they reach school age, and are then taken home for good.

*Photo: VBJK*

## Chapter seven

# *Working together with the parents*

The process of familiarising both parents and children with our institution is an essential aspect in bridging the gap between the home of the child and the childcare centre. This has been part of our pedagogical framework from the start, and year by year we have developed this orientation process further, not neglecting any aspect, but moulding it to fit each individual family.

We know that the children need time to develop a feeling of security in a new and unfamiliar environment with people they do not know. In order to shape this new phase in their lives positively, a close cooperation between the parents and the educators is required, with particular respect for the individual personality of the child. During this transition period, each child requires a different kind of support. At the same time, it means an adjustment for the parents too, especially when this is their first child going into childcare. We understand the parents' worries about how their child might feel when they are not there. This explains why we start preparing the parents before the child's familiarisation phase actually begins.

When the parents are invited to a first meeting with the educators, the leaders of the childcare staff will have completed the new admissions and will know how many children to prepare for, and when they will be arriving. The familiarisation phase may in some cases begin before the summer holidays, depending on each individual family's situation. In 2002 we made a change in our approach. Until then, parents and their children had joined the morning groups and met the children who had already completed the familiarisation process. Now, we introduce the new group members in the afternoons. As a rule, the other children will have left by then. We have realised that the children will encounter a calmer atmosphere and have plenty of time to get used to the unfamiliar childcare workers and their new surroundings. Only after having spent some afternoons in the childcare centre will they join the morning groups and meet the other children in the group.

The first meeting is held three to four months before the process of familiarisation begins. The parents get to know the educators and meet each other. The course of the familiarisation process is explained to them. It is important for us to hear whether the children have experienced separation from their parents before and, if so, how they reacted. We discuss with the parents who will continuously accompany the child during this familiarisation phase - the mother, the father, or another trusted person. For each child we create a personal notebook in which we write down all the topics that have been discussed. The parents can then read it through again at home. Often we have also invited the parents of children who are already attending

the centre. They are able to share the new parents' concerns and can reassure them by telling them how the other parents felt in the same situation and how their children experienced the familiarisation process.

After this introductory meeting, we organise regular get-togethers in the centre for the new children and their parents. We favour inviting them for coffee in the afternoons, because some of the 'old' parents from the current group also show up. The newcomers can observe how we handle the children, can ask questions and can thus become better acquainted with us.

Individual one-on-one conversations about the children and their family situations take place during the familiarisation process, when the parent is accompanying the child in the centre. We learn everything about the children's likes and dislikes, their mannerisms, but also about their sleeping habits. It is important to us to show the parents that we want to give their children as much personalised care as possible. Naturally the Turkish speaking educators take on the familiarisation of children whose mother tongue is Turkish, in order to begin bridge-building in the children's trusted language as well.

Turkish dad with his daughter during her familiarisation. *Photo: Kita Dresdener Strasse*

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During the time that the parents spend with their children in our centre, we agree on tasks for them to do. This helps parents to disentangle themselves from their child and prepares them for separation. For example, they may assist with the decoration of the rooms, including the above mentioned family picture walls. The children should gradually see themselves reflected in these rooms and recognise them as their own.

As the separation phase between children and parents begins, all parents leave the group room together. At this time of first separation they can drink coffee or smoke a cigarette together and can give each other moral support. They are all having the same thoughts, namely: 'How is my child doing? Does he or she feel all right?' We have observed that this phase of familiarisation leads to a sense of solidarity among parents, and that friendships are forged. This applies to the children as well.

We support this intensive cooperation with the parents, and also their socialising, by putting together an address directory for each family, which includes photos and names. We also encourage the parents to organise joint activities after childcare and to exchange childminding services.

Over the years, the cooperation of childcare workers and parents has intensified into a close partnership. While at first it was called the 'parent project' - the educators working together with the parents and preparing parents' evenings -, we now speak of the 'teamwork with parents project'. This teamwork has become much more complex: parents' evenings are prepared together, everyone suggests topics, together we discuss who would be the best person to moderate, and experts from outside the centre are invited. But the more casual activities during the open afternoons, like for example drinking coffee or spending more time in the groups, have also become well established.

Parents share their talents. A father who is a musician from Cuba visits his son's group regularly and plays music with the children and the educators. Not every parent can make their work relevant to the group. But each parent is welcome to read a picture book to the children, either in the afternoon or before going to work.

In order to also give us further financial backing, one parent group started a fundraising committee. Through a European Union-sponsored project the parents managed to obtain money, so that a meeting room for all the parents could be created in the childcare centre. We unanimously agreed to relinquish another staff room for this purpose.

Parents can drink coffee and collect information in the meeting room. For example, an address file with information on paediatricians was created for them to use. The parents' meeting point has also been responsible for organising information fairs. Some of these events focused on themes for particular age groups. For example, the principals of the neighbouring schools were invited to present their school programmes.

But we also had an educationist presenting new findings in education research. In the first year there was money available for paying professional fees and the parents' meeting facility was regularly organised by two mothers. Since this is no longer the case, educational events do not take place at the moment, which we regret very much, but parents still meet there to chat or drink coffee together. Meanwhile, another mother has offered to take up this service again after the summer holidays as soon as she has helped her child become familiarised with our childcare centre.

However, the parents have found other ways to continue their support for the interests of the centre. The work they put in can also be physically strenuous. We had our roof garden repaired a while ago because water had leaked through into the building. After the repair work had been completed, there was no money left to replant the ruined roof garden and prepare flower beds for the children. The fundraising committee took on this challenge and applied for a grant intended for neighbourhood improvement. On many weekends, mothers and fathers came to help with the restoration of the roof. They came from all the groups and as a result of the joint efforts, new contacts were made.

We take it for granted that we must meet the needs of the families. In the first years of its existence, the childcare centre was closed for three weeks during the summer holidays. Since an increasing number of parents asked for ongoing childcare during the holidays as well, we changed our schedule. The childcare centre is now open throughout the year except for the days between Christmas and New Year and on two more days, when the educators participate in child development workshops.

The opening hours are reviewed annually. For this purpose we have prepared questionnaires to systematically record whether our opening times still meet the demand, or whether they should be changed. In particular we are considering prolonging the opening hours into the evening, because we have noticed that hardly any children arrive at the centre before 8 a.m., whereas a lot of them are still present at 5 p.m. So far there has been no need for alterations, but this could change any year with the admission of the new children.

## Chapter eight

# *New projects*

Thank heavens for errors! We are certainly lucky to be allowed to work in such a large and beautiful building. But our work could not be done without committed colleagues. Therefore it is very important to us to find additional time to critically examine new and not so new pedagogical approaches. Currently the team is participating in a project on the development of quality criteria for the Contextual Approach. There are many commonalities between this pedagogical approach and our understanding of working with children. We introduce changes in our work with children as a result of our attentive observation of them. We identify key situations that are important to the children and can serve as examples to use in our daily pedagogical practice. The changes we make are worked out in writing in small groups, and then discussed in the team meetings. This then becomes integrated into our method of working with children. At the moment, we are very much involved in testing and applying the evaluation tools of the Contextual Approach, since the educational experts who have developed them need our findings in order to continue with their work.

Having worked in the project for some time and having collected a lot of suggestions, we notice how our work with the children has changed. We are now putting more emphasis on observing which activities the children undertake, including what we observe in our daily routine. Just recently, a four year old boy presented to his group a book on outer space that he had brought from home. It was amazing how much he was able to tell us. The boy's groupmates and the educators became so interested in the subject that landing on the moon is now the current topic within this group.

When reviewing our work critically, we recognise that the Contextual Approach is a comprehensive working approach and we realise that we still have many more steps to take. For example, in a team consisting of only women it is not always easy to ensure that female-specific issues do not dominate. This begins in the dressing-up corner of each group, where the children will perhaps find only 'pretty dresses', and carries through to the activities in which artwork may dominate and handicrafts are neglected. Still, once we are conscious of such issues, we can begin to make changes.

But the personal commitment of individual childcare workers is also of great benefit to the children. During their visit to another childcare centre, two of our colleagues had the chance to see a *Snoezelen* room. Afterwards they suggested to the team that we should also convert an unused bedroom into a darkened relaxation room with music, glow-in-the-dark colours and scented lamps. After discussions and further visits, to give more educators an impression of this type of room, we decided in favour of it.

One colleague bought the necessary items and took charge of transforming the room. Together with the children from her group and a trainee she converted the walls into an 'underwater world'. She also created information sheets on the *Snoezelen* topic for all childcare workers, so that we could lay down the rules for the use of this room.

We were anxious to learn about the children's reactions. How would they respond to a room that was meant to strongly appeal to their senses? Would they behave differently in the group? Would they become calmer or wilder? Would we be able to tell when a child had been in the *Snoezelen* room? We were totally surprised to see how good it was for our children. It has a calming effect on hyperactive children in particular, and they like being in the room. All of them are full of ideas of what to do in there and after a while they begin role playing with the educator. In the meantime, the *Snoezelen* room has become part of our pedagogical work and many of the children use it. We also held a *Snoezelen* party so that the parents could get an impression of how this room affects people.

We have come one step further in improving our work. What was once a disused multi-storey car park that nobody needed, has now become a stimulating and caring environment for the needs of a diverse group of children.
Let's try to do more!

**Gerda Wunschel, with the cooperation of Ilse Ziess-Lawrence**

*Photo: VBJK*

***We like to exchange views and experiences with people who are interested. Please contact us:***

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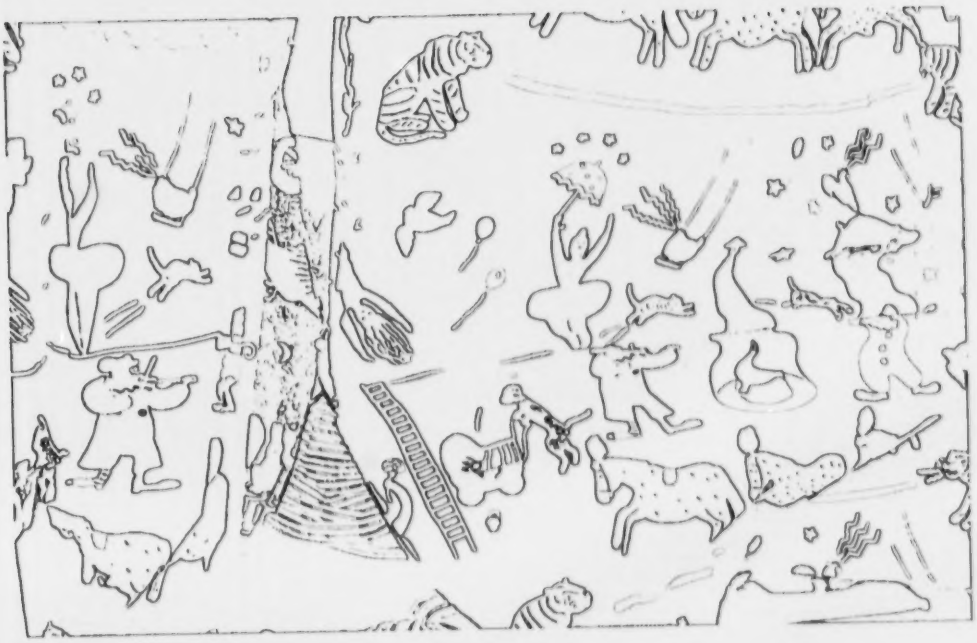

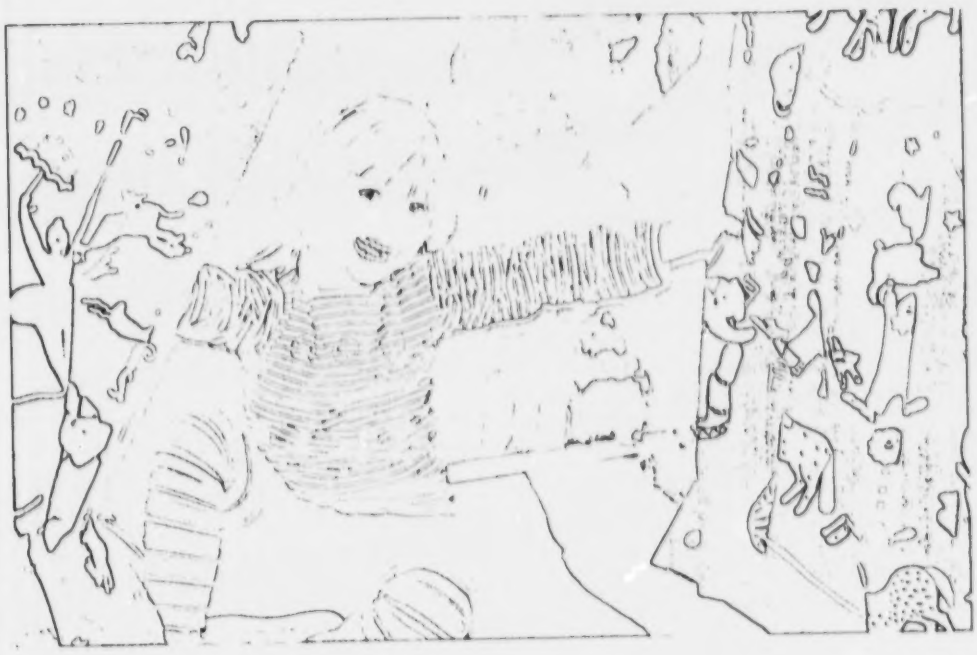

*Photos: VBJK*

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# Appendix

## *Guidelines and Basic Principles for working with the Contextual Child Development Approach in childcare centres* [2]

### *Guidelines*

The *Situationsansatz* (Contextual Child Development Approach) is based upon the premise that children inherently possess individual rights and that they carry out their development themselves. Children accomplish the steps necessary for their development through their own activities. Adults are responsible for supporting children through accountable relationships, and for providing a stimulating environment in which the children can strive towards further development.

The pedagogical goals of the Contextual Approach - Autonomy, Solidarity, Competence - are founded upon basic democratic values and societal developments. They contain important areas of personal development – competence regarding oneself, regarding social behaviour, and regarding knowledge. This means understanding children and their developmental needs in their concrete life situation and supporting the children's abilities to get along well with themselves, and with others, and to deal with the tasks before them. In respecting the different experiences the children bring with them, the educators encourage the children to participate in shaping the social process. Uniqueness and solidarity belong together.

The Contextual Approach in childcare centres considers raising, educating and caring for children a social task. The principles of the Contextual Approach are based upon the founding understanding of the Child and Youth Services Act, the KJHG Declaration[3]. This makes childcare centres an option for the children's and families' living situations according to their qualitative and quantitative needs. The principles take into consideration the diversity in ways of living, and create a specific profile. Raising, educating, and caring for children are part of the same process.

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2 These principles have kindly been made available by the Internationale Akademie, Institut für den Situtationsansatz at the Freien Universität Berlin.

3 The Child and Youth Services Act of 1990 introduced the legal entitlement to childcare for every child.

### *Basic principles*

1. ***The pedagogical task is based on the children's and their families' social and cultural living situations.***

The experiences that children have in their families, in daily life in the childcare centres, and in further social areas become the basis for pedagogical activities. This includes situations which children bring up themselves, as well as situations which are necessary for growing into society and are therefore introduced by the adults. The needs and interests that children bring with them, their experiences and the meaning they assign to these experiences, as well as their questions and answers, make up the focal point of pedagogical activities.

2. ***Key Situations have to be discovered by watching the children and bringing up discourses with parents and other experts.***

Life situations that are important to children, both now and in the future, are brought up in discussion with the educator's team, as well as with parents and other adults. Educators notice the questions posed by children about their living situations and consider the different ways in which children express their feelings, needs and thoughts. A key situation is a real life situation that influences the feeling, acting, imagining and thinking of a child in a relevant way. A great variety of living situations come into question; the educators select those key situations which open up the possibility of understanding situations in an *exemplary way*, of participating in shaping and changing the situation, and by so doing, of gaining skills relevant to life.

3. ***The practitioners discover what children want to know and experience, and open topics worth knowing and experiencing to them, using real-life situations.***

Children learn from and in life with its challenges, contradictions and changes, and adjust their knowledge and ability to this. Topical learning occurs in social contexts. A richly-stimulating learning culture sustains children's curiosity and interest, their desire to discover new things and their joy in experimentation, as well as encouraging many-faceted opportunities for perception and expression. The pedagogical work opens up learning possibilities inside and outside of the childcare centres, and introduces new areas of learning.

4. ***Practitioners support girls and boys in their gender-specific development and are alert to stereotyping mechanisms***

The differences between girls and boys/women and men are noticed and respected. Stereotypically assigned roles, and acceptance of these roles, is critically opposed. The practitioners test their own gender-specific behaviour and their attitudes towards boys and girls. They look for

opportunities to widen possibilities for gender-specific identification.

5. ***Practitioners fulfil the requirements which allow children to satisfy their need to play and to deal with the reality of their World independently.***

The pedagogical work supports children in developing their imagination and their creative powers, and to adjust to the World in a manner appropriate for their development. Practitioners use attentive observation of play as a possibility to learn how children interpret the world and what moves children.

6. ***Through work with groups of mixed ages, the rich stimulation milieu in the group of children is revealed.***

Children bring different experiences and desires for activity to the group, and also learn without the adults from and with each other. The practitioners create the environment to allow these possibilities to go into effect. The older and younger children's specific needs and developmental tasks are observed and purposefully taken into consideration. At the same time, conditions are created to offer children the chance to form relationships with children of the same age.

7. ***Children participate actively in forming their situation in the childcare centres.***

Children are actively involved in everything that affects them, as far as it is appropriate to their development. Planning occurs primarily *with* children, not *for* them. Children are trusted and encouraged to do the things that they can do themselves.

8. ***An acknowledged negotiation about values and norms takes place in daily life together; appropriate rules are agreed upon together with the children.***

Children experience *what* is important for life together and *why* it is important in concrete living situations. Moral conflicts and dealing with conflicts are of high priority in daily life in childcare centres. Children can experience and test the meaning and validation of rules and norms in concrete situations. They discover that rules are made and therefore can be changed.

9. ***The work in the childcare centre is orientated according to the opportunities and demands of the children's living situations, in a society that is characterised by different cultures.***

Practitioners recognise and use the unique learning opportunities offered by children of divergent cultural heritage living together, and support intercultural interaction. They actively oppose discrimination and the formation of

prejudice, and create a culture of respect and civil courage in the childcare centres. The pedagogical work takes into consideration the fact that a higher number of the young generation will live and work in cultures other than the cultures of their heritage.

***10. The work supports the integration of children with special needs and opposes exclusion.***

A variety of possibilities for social experiences arise from living with children of different developmental possibilities, abilities and individual needs. The childcare centres purposefully respond to these differences and offer support for children with disabilities. They support contact and understanding among the children and offer special help in overcoming and compensating restrictions and discrimination in difficult life situations.

***11. Rooms and their arrangement are appropriate to the pedagogical concept.***

As much as possible children are involved in furnishing and decorating the rooms - they leave traces behind. The arrangement of the inner and outer rooms allows individual activities as well as activities in smaller or larger groups of children, and offers enough room for movement and for relaxation. Rooms and materials stimulate active experimentation, discovery, and creativity in the younger as well as the older children. The arrangement of the room and the materials provided are agreed upon in a process involving all participants, and under consideration of pedagogical, ecological and economic issues.

***12. Practitioners are teachers as well as learners.***

Practitioners reflect societal developments and their understanding of children's development and growth. They make new knowledge and experiences suitable for the children. They are responsible for supporting children individually, appropriate to their development. They involve outside experts, from whom children as well as adults can learn more, and make learning with different generations possible. Practitioners learn to open themselves up to the world of the children, from their viewpoint, from their individual mannerisms. Practitioners make learning processes possible and participate in these themselves.

***13. Parents and other adults are invited to actively participate.***

Parents are the most important partner in raising children. They are invited to participate in everything that happens in the childcare centres. The experiences that parents have and the pedagogical knowledge the practitioners have are combined. Practitioners make their work transparent and are open to suggestions

and ideas from parents. They encourage parents to make suggestions, to offer criticism, and to work together to search for possibilities for change.

The childcare centres also co-operate with other people who are willing to get involved with children.

***14. The childcare centre develops close relations with the social environment.***

The childcare centre considers itself an active part of society's infrastructure. The centre seeks contact with other pedagogical and social establishments, with clubs, centres and people important to cultural and economical life, with whom they can network. The centre is a hub of neighbourly contact and interaction. It participates in city planning and assistance to youth through public welfare. Practitioners consider it a duty to open themselves up to the outside world, to actively involve the children in shaping public life, and to create local publicity for children's needs.

***15. The pedagogical work is based on open planning and is continually documented.***

Open planning means that planning is developed together with children, parents and other adults, and that the planning is flexible. It contains time spans of varying lengths, allows room for the children's spontaneity, for individual rates of development and previous abilities, but also for unpredictable influences from outside. Planning contains differentiated activities for individual children, small groups, and children with special needs.

The four steps of planned pedagogical processes are:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Question* | = *analyse the situation* |
| *Decide* | = *determine the goals* |
| *Act* | = *set the situation* |
| *Reflect* | = *evaluate the experience.* |

***16. The childcare centre considers itself a learning organisation.***

The internal organisational structure of the childcare centre makes it possible to put the foundational orientation and the pedagogical tasks into effect. Practitioners consider themselves members of a team in which each member takes on specific tasks and feels responsible for the entire team. There is room and time to make the institutional and organisational practices objects for reflection and change. Practitioners and parents develop strategies for the further benefit of childcare centres and react to changing needs with wider and more flexible options. Changes are viewed as an opportunity.[4]

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[4] Source: Christa Preissing, Institut für den Situtationsansatz at the Freien Universität Berlin, Königin- Luise- Strasse 24-26, 14195 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: preiss2@zedat.fu-berlin.de

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The Bernard van Leer Foundation, established in 1949, is based in the Netherlands. We actively engage in supporting early childhood development activities in around 40 countries. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for vulnerable children younger than eight years old, growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. The objective is to enable young children to develop their innate potential to the full. Early childhood development is crucial to creating opportunities for children and to shaping the prospects of society as a whole.

We fulfil our mission through two interdependent strategies:

- Making grants and supporting programmes for culturally and contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood development;
- Sharing knowledge and expertise in early childhood development, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.

The Foundation currently supports about 150 major projects for young children in both developing and industrialised countries. Projects are implemented by local actors which may be public, private or community-based organisations. Documenting, learning and communicating are integral to all that we do. We are committed to systematically sharing the rich variety of knowledge, know how and lessons learned that emerge from the projects and networks we support. We facilitate and create a variety of products for different audiences about work in the field of early childhood development.

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